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Childrem's Tales from Scottish Ballads

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Children's Tales From Scottish Ballads

THE LOCHMABEN HARPER.

"Oh, heard ye of a silly harper,
Wha lang lived in Lochmaben town,
How he did gang to fair England,
To steal King Henry's wanton brown?"

Once upon a time there was an old man in Lochmaben, who made his living by going round the country playing on his harp. He was very old, and very blind, and there was such a simple air about him, that people were inclined to think that he had not all his wits, and they always called him "The silly Lochmaben Harper."

Now Lochmaben is in Dumfriesshire, not very far from the English border, and the old man sometimes took his harp and made long journeys into England, playing at all the houses that he passed on the road.

Once when he returned from one of these journeys, he told everyone how he had seen the English King, King Henry, who happened to be living at that time at a castle in the north of England, and although he thought the King a very fine looking man indeed, he thought far more of a frisky brown horse which his Majesty was riding, and he made up his mind that some day it should be his.

All the people laughed loudly when they heard this, and looked at one another and tapped their foreheads, and said, "poor old man, his brain is a little touched; he grows sillier and sillier"; but the Harper only smiled to himself, and went home to his cottage, where his wife was busy making porridge for his supper.

"Wife," he said, setting down his harp in the corner of the room, "I am going to steal the King of England's brown horse."

"Are you?" said his wife, and she went on stirring the porridge. She knew her husband better than the neighbors did, and she knew that when he said a thing he generally managed to do it.

The old man sat looking into the fire for a long time, and at last said, "I will need a horse with a foal, to help me: if I can find that, I can do it."

"Tush!" said his wife as she lifted the pan from the fire, and poured the boiling porridge carefully into two bowls; "if that is all that thou needest, the brown horse is thine. Hast forgotten the old gray mare thou left at home in the stable? Whilst thou wert gone, she bore a fine gray foal."

"Ah!" said the old Harper, his eyes kindling, "Is she fond of her foal?"

"Fond of it, say you? I warrant bolts and bars would not keep her from it. Ride thou away on the old mare, and I will keep the foal at home; and I promise thee she will bring home the brown horse as straight as a die, without thy aid, if thou desire it."

"Thou art a clever woman, Janet: thou thinkest of everything," said her husband proudly, as she handed him his bowlful of porridge, and then sat down to sup her own at the other side of the fire, chuckling to herself, partly at her husband's words of praise, and partly at the simplicity of the neighbors, who called him a silly old harper.

Next morning the old man went into the stable, and, taking a halter from the wall, he hid it in his stocking; then he led out his old mare, who neighed and whinnied in distress at having to leave her little foal behind her. Indeed he had some difficulty in getting her to start, for when he had mounted her, and had turned her head along the Carlisle road, she backed, and reared, and sidled, and made such a fuss, that quite a crowd collected around her, crying, "Come and see the silly Harper of Lochmaben start to bring home the King of England's brown horse."

At last the Harper got the mare to start, and he rode, playing on his harp all the time, until he came to the castle where the King of England was. And, as luck would have it, who should come to the gate, just as he arrived, but King Henry himself. Now his Majesty loved music, and the old man really played very well, so he asked him to come into the great hall of the castle, and let all the company hear him play.

At this invitation the Harper jumped

joyously down from his horse, as if to make haste to go in, and then hesitated.

"Nay, but if it please your Majesty," he said humbly, "my old nag is footsore and weary: mayhap there is a stall in your Majesty's stable where she might rest the night."

Now the King loved all animals, and it pleased him that the old man should be so mindful of his beast; and seeing one of the stablemen in the distance, he turned his head and cried carelessly, "Here, sirrah! Take this old man's nag, and put it in a stall in the stable where my own brown horse stands, and see to it that it has a good supper of oats, and a comfortable litter of hay."

Then he led the Harper into the hall where all his nobles were, and I need not tell you that the old man played his very best. He struck up such a merry tune that before long everybody began to dance, and the very servants came creeping to the door to listen. The cooks left their pans, and the chambermaids their dusters, the butlers their pantries; and, best of all, the stablemen came from the stables without remembering to lock the doors.

After a time, when they had all grown weary of dancing, the clever old man began to play such soft, soothing music, that everyone began to nod, and at last fell fast asleep.

He played on for a time, till he was certain that no one was awake, then he laid down his harp, and slipped off his shoes, and stole silently down the broad staircase, smiling to himself as he did so.

With noiseless steps he crept to the stable door, which, as he expected, he found unlocked, and entered, and for one moment he stood looking about him in wonder, for it was the most splendid stable he had ever seen, with thirty horses standing side by side, in one long row. They were all beautiful horses, but the finest of them all was King Henry's favorite brown horse, which he always rode himself.

The old Harper knew it at once, and, quick as thought, he loosed it, and, drawing the halter which he had brought with him out of his stocking, he slipped it over his head.

Then he loosed his old gray mare, and tied the end of the halter to her tail, so that, wherever she went, the brown horse was bound to follow. He chuckled to himself as he led the two animals out of the stable and across the courtyard, to the great wrought-iron gate, and when he had opened this, he let the old mare go, giving her a good smack on the ribs as he did so. And the old gray mare, remembering her little foal shut up in the stable at home, took off at a gallop, straight across country, over hedges, and ditches, and walls, and fences, pulling the King's brown horse after her at such a rate that he had never even a chance to bite her tail, as he had thought of doing at first, when he was angry at being tied to it.

Although the mare was old, she was very fleet of foot, and before the day broke she was standing with her companion before her master's cottage at Lochmaben. Her stable door was locked, so she began to neigh with all her might, and at last the noise awoke the Harper's wife.

Now the old couple had a little servant girl who slept in the attic, and the old woman called to her sharply. "Get up at once, thou lazy wench; dost thou not hear thy master and his mare at the door?"

The girl did as she was bid, and, dressing herself hastily, went to the door, and looked through the keyhole to see if it were her master. She saw no one there save the gray mare and a strange brown horse.

"Oh mistress,mistress, get up," she cried in astonishment, running to the kitchen. "What do you think has happened? The gray mare has gotten a brown foal." "Hold thy clavers!" retorted the old woman; "methinks thou art blinded by the moonlight, if thou knowest not the difference between a full-grown horse and a two-months'-old foal. Go and look again, and bring me word if 'tis not a brown horse the mare has brought with her."

The girl ran to the door, and presently came back to say that she had been mistaken, and that it was a brown horse, and that all the neighbors were peeping out of their windows to see what the noise was about.

The old woman laughed as she rose and dressed herself, and went out with the girl to help her tie up the two horses.

" 'Tis the silly old Harper of Lochmaben they call him," she said to herself, "but I

wonder how many of them would have had the wit to gain a new horse so easily."

Meanwhile at the English castle the Harper had stolen silently back to the hall after he had let the horses loose, and, taking up his harp again, he harped softly until the morning broke, and the sleeping men round him began to awake.

The King and his nobles called loudly for breakfast, and the servants crept hastily away, afraid lest it might come to be known that they had left their work the evening before to listen to the stranger's music.

The cooks went back to their pans and the chambermaids to their dusters and the stablemen and grooms trooped out of doors to look after their horses; but presently they all came rushing back again, helter-skelter, with pale faces, for the stable door had been left open, and the King's favorite brown horse had been stolen, as well as the Harper's old gray mare. For a long time no one dare tell the King, but at last the head stableman ventured upstairs and broke the news to the master of the house and the master of the house told the Lord Chamberlain, and the Lord Chamberlain told the King.

At first his Majesty was very angry, and threatened to dismiss all the grooms, but his attention was soon diverted by the cunning old Harper, who threw down his harp, and pretended to be in great distress.

"I am ruined, I am ruined," he exclaimed, for I lost the gray mare's foal just before I left Scotland, and I looked to the price of it for rent, and now the old gray mare herself is gone, and how am I to travel about and earn my daily bread without her.

Now the King was very kind-hearted and he was sorry for the poor old man for he believed every word he said, so he clapped him on the back and bade him play some more of his wonderful music, and promised to make up to him for his losses.

Then the wicked old Harper rejoiced, for he knew that his trick had succeeded, and he picked up his harp again, and played so beautifully that the King forgot all about the loss of his favorite horse.

All that day the Harper played to him, and on the morrow, when he would set out for his home, in spite of all his entreaties that he would stay longer, he made his treasurer give him three times the value of his old gray mare, in solid gold, because he said that if his servants had locked the stable door, the mare would not have been stolen, and besides that he gave him the price of this foal, which the wicked man had said that he had lost. "For," said the King, " 'tis a pity that such a marvelous harper should lack the money to pay his rent."

Then the cunning old Harper went home a triumph to Lochmaben, and the good King never knew till the end of his life how terribly he had been cheated.

(E. GRIERSON).

From the "Haunts of the Stag" to Australian Plains

ANNIE MACAULAY JAMEISON.

(Continued)

Chapter XXI.

The moon-light lay upon the floor of the room in Lewis, where Black had written. Alma MacIver is sitting there. Presently she heard the now well-beloved step and saw the well known stalwart form of Norman coming along the twilight road from the shore. She joined him, and took his hand. He was thinking in his great tender way, full of pitying love, how pale and beautiful she looked, in the mysterious Lewis evening light that makes steadfast eyes graver and more wistful.

They would all fain have stayed longer on the island where they enjoyed the twilight night watches, and white flashing lights, such as the "Seven Hunters" on the "Eilean More" and Loch Carloway with Aird Leimisheader's flashes every three seconds.

They drove to see the old Bute of Lewis, the northern point of the Hebrides. A light visible nineteen miles, Lloyd's signals, were shown them there, and they heard the fog siren with its blasts high and low in quick succession.

There was no barrier between the Aus-

tralians and the kindness that was pressed upon them from all quarters and highest ranks. For a while they forgot the outer world. In the poorest thatched cottages in the island they saw one book wherein for years the Crofters and fisher men found light and pure nourishment and an interpreting response to whatever is deepest in them, the Gaelic version of the Holy Scripture. With rich possession they are at one, praising and blessing God.

In a world-wide sense, they take up the influence of their own "sweet language," at home and all over the world. It lives on in their ears like a music that can never be forgotten by them, the most winning of languages. Somehow, rest and faith came to them all in the silence of Sheila's island. Here, they learned to be content and wait on in the island with William Black's haunting names, near the moon-silvered wash of the waves. Sometimes Alma MacIver sat near the shore, turning it all over in her mind. This was rest; after the tide of life too full for sound or foam, closing her eyes and dreaming of cocoanut trees, and palms and the long swell of the breakers, near India's coral strands. Nothing blotted these spots out. The bitterness they brought Alma would never die, yet she always saw the stars in the infinite of heaven; "God knows all about it," she thought. With this thought an eager light would come into her eyes, her face would change, with an intangible change. "He has his own way of doing things and works them out straight, a deeper, a kinder, safer way," said Alma to herself.

After a long night of sorrow and pain, joy had come to this woman,—her light had broken in the East. What she sowed, she reaped, loving words. They all came back in blessings on herself. In spite of her upbringing and early surroundings there was for years a strong spiritual trait in Alma MacIver's character, she liked to go to the "Blue stone church" not so far from the Butt light, into the solemnity and the peaceful atmosphere. It seemed to her that the souls of the fisher-folks who sat there every Sabbath were lifted up to heaven, like the holy sisters in some convents. But two fishermen came easily back to earth again to be of the earth, earthy for some time.

What rivets of fellowship, these Sabbaths on Sheila's island promote, like the nails that fasten the planks in their fishing boats, they bind securely against the strength of the world and the ocean's waves. The great life designer has fashioned the "style" of it all. They are all working for one common end, fishers and crofters, each has his special task until they slip their cables to greet the unseen and receive thier new name.

Much that was soft and gentle spoke to our Australians out of the mouths of Lewis fisher folks, their Biblical training overshadows so much with its authority from their birth to their death.

Those people on the shores and crofts are naturally very glad to have among them strangers who know their own common speech. Highlanders all over the world cherish even fragments of it with reverential fondness; it satisfies their outward sense and very often opens their inward sense of worship, which is the far grander result. Their remembrance of early sanctuaries in the green spots in Lewis attunes the mind in other lands to religious thoughts, helping many men over the sea to translate into tangible action and deeds the grand mission of life, making the designer's vision an actual and splendid fact.

CHAPTER XXII.

Men and women who know "Sheila's island" well, find some Crofters' sons in Glasgow's big yards, in lives of industry of an amazing kind where grey hounds of the deep are built and launched. Some of them saw their first yard not far off from "Arnish light" and the "Black Beacon" on the "Seid Rock" serving their time, where keels and mast were made when the master of the yard loved brigs and schooners and he had ideas that quickened into life their success.

With much regret they said good-bye to their island's Billing's gate—the market for the products of the depths of the sea where the steam trawler is both smack and carrier combined.

These sons of the island went away to the carnivals of labor where from morn till night the thud of some colossal steam hammer shakes the earth, and immense furnaces pour molten lava into appointed moulds. They have become workers in iron and steel and brass, in places of mystery, but they know every man's life is a plan of God, a Divine drawing.

Our Australians slept in rooms on Sheila's island, rooms very still, where there was no sound save the quiet purr of the flames in the peat fire and the fall of ash on the hearth. Summer nights there were windless and very quiet, and only the stars looked down upon altars that were never changed, and calm hearts trying to win courage and throwing themselves forward in order that God's plan might be lived with the light of eternity upon broken ways.

The nearing time made Ross and MacIver sad. They had a foretaste on this island of much that weaned them all from spots where the palms lift their fronded heights in the tropical air. They were weaned from it all by this touch of simple life. They felt as though lifted up out of the swirling drift of wordly cares and ambitions, surrounded by sweetness and peace, but the end came quickly for Ross was cabled—"Come home."

You do not know what these words meant to them all, this call summoning the squatter back to life again. but he never faltered and they all believed that a day would dawn

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